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BOOK REVIEW / David Wagner

Papal
path to
peace

Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts are a pair of very thorough reporters who have taken the Vatican as their specialty. Last year they produced *Pontiff*, a general inner-workings book about the papacy. This year it's *Averting Armageddon*, focusing on papal diplomacy.

Working from interviews with papal secretaries and diplomats, staffers of the Vatican newspaper, contacts in the Italian and Vatican security forces, and so on, the authors have produced a riveting account of papal diplomacy in action. Their present-tense narrative shifts from scene to scene, as though in a novel — though the ample footnotes always show the reader the foundation for every statement.

There are certain main areas of endeavor in John Paul II's diplomacy as presented by the two writers.

- Poland: John Paul keeps in close touch with events, and with Lech Walesa personally. He is determined to see Solidarity survive and succeed. He sees the right to form independent labor unions as vital to the human dignity of workers, and he sees communism — supposedly the workers' movement — as the principal present-day threat to this right. Mr. Walesa took the name "Solidarity" from John Paul's first encyclical, *The Redeemer of Man*. The two agreed on the name for the union.

- The *pista Bulgara*, that is, the "Bulgarian path" along which lies the explanation of the 1981 assassination attempt. This obsesses John Paul, and reinforces his Polish-bred anti-Sovietism. The authors cover Mehmet Ali Agca's life in prison, his writing to the pope, and John Paul's visit to him.

- Central America: the Vatican shares the Reagan administration's view of the consequences of communist domination there, but is not convinced of the domino theory. Vatican officials came around to the American viewpoint on the liberation of Grenada, but were still miffed at not having been briefed beforehand.

- The Middle East: the Vatican believes that a Palestinian state is the only hope for peace, that this can best be achieved by encouraging moderate Arab elements, and that Yasser Arafat can be one such. Notwithstanding Vatican-Israeli coolness (partly due to hoary myths about Pius XII and the Jews during World War II), the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, keeps in touch with the Vatican. In fact, it briefed the Ital-

ian anti-terrorist force about Agca's presence in Italy several days before the assassination attempt, but to no avail.

Other topics covered are the workings of the Vatican Secretariat of State, the papal household, and the Vatican's worldwide diplomatic network. This network operates almost entirely behind the scenes, seeking to preserve the independence of the Catholic Church, to defuse international tensions, and to safeguard and extend human dignity, one of John Paul's favorite political principles.

In the course of these pursuits, the Vatican relies for a great deal of its information on the CIA. Messrs. Thomas and Morgan-Witts call attention to this frequently. Even though the "Company" was in the dog-house for a while for failing to act on early warnings about Agca, it still provides John Paul with a weekly briefing, and still works closely with the Secretariat of State.

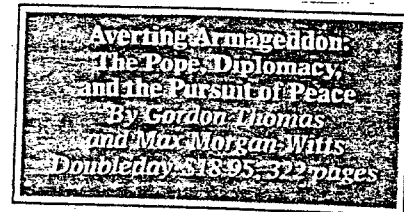
In light of this, the CIA's apparent efforts to discourage the investigation of the *pista Bulgara* are very puzzling. The authors go off into labyrinthine speculation about possible motives and connections. They are puzzled, too.

It is difficult to gauge the two authors' attitude toward the Catholic Church. It would appear that they are not Catholics; yet they never make the error, so common among non-Catholic Vaticanologists, of assuming that Vatican actions always have non-religious motives.

They are also properly discreet about their own political views. They treat old-fashioned anti-communism with a touch of disdain, but that of John Paul with great respect. Of Vatican politics under John Paul, they say flat out: "They are firmly committed to the right." John Paul is firmly committed to disarmament, but is equally firm on the point that disarmament by the West must not be unilateral.

Some facts and statements in the book seem to place the present-day Vatican in the quasi-pacifist camp, but on consulting the footnotes, one finds that such facts and statements almost all have the same source: the pope's English-language secretary, Monsignor Emory Kabongo, of Uganda. (Though the authors do not mention this, Monsignor Kabongo is not the only highly placed black in John Paul's Vatican: there is also Bernard Cardinal Gantin, of Benin, president of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops.)

Above all, this book is meticulously researched and documented. In a climate where the Vatican is considered fair game for gutter journalism, it is refreshing to see so responsible a piece of reporting.



David Wagner is a member of The Washington Times editorial staff.